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Walter le Rey Marchis, a Percy King of Arms, and the Falkirk Roll of 1298

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WALTER le Rey first appears in the historical record amongst the retinue of Sir Henry Percy at the Battle of Falkirk in 1298.¹ C. H. Hunter Blair tentatively identified Walter as “probably [from] Ray in Whelpington” in Northumberland,² but in fact Walter le Rey is much more interesting than he would be as a minor Northumbrian landholder: he was a heraldic King of Arms, employed by Percy in 1298, quite possibly the author of the Falkirk Roll of Arms, and later became a King of Arms in the royal household under Edward I. He was the first private King of Arms we can identify by name and the first whose path into royal employment we can trace. N. Denholm-Young made this identification in 1965,³ and the aim of this paper is to draw together the fragmentary references to Walter, and relate him to the northern context of the rise of the Percies and the border in the time of Edward I.

In the 1290s Edward I’s political and military activity had shifted from Wales and the Welsh Marches to relations with Scotland and the importance of the Northern Marches.⁴ By 1297 the King of Scotland, John de Balliol, was Edward’s prisoner, and William Wallace had emerged as the key Scots leader, defeating the English army near Stirling in September 1297 as well as causing considerable devastation in incursions into northern England.⁵ During the first months of 1298 Edward was assembling his forces for the campaign that led to the Scots defeat at the Battle of Falkirk on 22 July 1298. The Anglo-Scottish border provided major opportunities for successful military commanders to build names, fortunes and political power-bases, and notable amongst these captains were Sir Robert Clifford and Sir

Henry Percy, Clifford establishing his main base in the west of the border (Cumberland and Westmorland) and Percy in the east in Northumberland. Henry Percy (c. 1273–1314) had only come of full age in 1294, but he quickly established his military and tournament reputation in the 1290s and his rise was meteoric. He went with Edward I to Scotland in 1296, and was knighted before Berwick and took part in the Battle of Dunbar. With four of the earls he made a special contract with the king for the Falkirk expedition, Percy agreeing to supply 50 men-at-arms.⁶ After the battle, he received £769 3s. 4d for his three months’ service with 50 barbed horses.⁷ Over the next decade he and Clifford shared power on the border and he became the first baron Percy by writ. He then shifted his base from Topcliffe on the Swale near Ripon to Alnwick, purchasing the estate from Bishop Antony Bek of Durham in 1309, thus establishing the enduring Percy dominance in Northumberland.⁸

Edward I’s reign also saw the emergence in England of heralds as a distinct profession, gradually distinguishing themselves from the ranks of minstrels and troubadours, and the establishment of heralds and Kings of Arms in royal employment.⁹ A Norroy King of Arms can be identified in a document of 1276, and in 1290 two Kings of Heralds, Little Robert and Nicholas Morell, were paid twenty shillings for their summer and winter robes.¹⁰ However, the great Rolls of Arms from this period do not (with the exception of Glover’s Roll) seem to have been drawn up for the king, or even for the great earls, but for the leading professional military commanders such as Clifford, Mortimer, de Grey and Percy.¹¹ The names of the private heralds who drew up the rolls have

not survived, with the one exception discussed in this paper.

The first reference to Walter occurs on 8 January 1297/98, when Edward I issued letters of protection to, amongst others, "Walter le Rey et Roger de Cheyny, qui cum Henrico de Percy" etc.¹² A further letter of protection issued on 28 May 1298 explicitly refers to "Walterus le Rey Marchis", again as part of Percy's retinue.¹³ As Denholm-Young argues, Walter "the March King of Arms" was serving Percy as a private herald. Other leaders at Falkirk had their own harpers or minstrels: John le Harpus with Norfolk, Nicholas le Harpour with Oxford, John le Harpur with Lancaster, and Richard le Harpour with the Steward of the Royal Household, Walter de Beaumont. "But Percy is the only one with the King of Arms in his retinue".¹⁴

One of the products of the Falkirk campaign was the so-called Falkirk Roll of Arms, a blazoned roll of the arms and names of one hundred and eleven bannerets and followers. The Falkirk Roll is the earliest roll of arms specifically associated with a military occasion. The original is lost, but copies have descended in two main versions, one represented in the Harleian manuscripts in the British Library and one formerly at Wrest Park (and more recently in the possession of Sir Anthony Wagner). Both versions are printed in Gough,¹⁵ and the textual details of the various manuscripts are given by Sir Anthony Wagner.¹⁶ It is quite likely that Walter le Rey Marchis was the author of this Roll. As Denholm-Young notes: "The suggestion is that the Harl. MS. is a copy of a roll made by Lord Percy's herald Wauter le Rey Marchis who was in Percy's retinue at the battle (Percy is no. 99 on the roll) in the fourth brigade with Earl Warenne's reserve".¹⁷ Sir Anthony Wagner has also agreed Walter may have been the compiler of the roll.¹⁸ A similar type of origin may lie behind some other heraldic rolls of this period: the Song of Caerlaverock (1300) may have been composed by one of Sir Robert Clifford's minstrel-heralds and the Parliamentary Roll of Arms (c. 1307-08) by his herald whilst Sir Robert was Marshal of England.¹⁹

The Falkirk Roll is important as the first occasion when the Percies used the blue lion on their shields: Sir Henry is blazoned as bearing "Dor ov ung leon dazure" [Or, a lion azure].²⁰ Up to this time the Percies had borne what is now known as "Percy Ancient", "azure a fess engrailed of five fusils or". This was the blazon for Henry's father in Charles' Roll (c. 1285) and first appears on a seal of William Percy (died 1245).²¹ In the Falkirk blazon Henry Percy retained the two tinctures (heraldic colours), but reversed them and adopted a new heraldic charge or design. This switch was undoubtedly the result of his feudal and personal links with the Fitz Alans, Earls of Arundel. Henry had married Eleanor, daughter of Richard, Earl of Arundel. Arundel bore "gules, a lion or", and Henry differenced his arms by using his family's old colours. Henry's arms are illustrated very finely on his seal to the Baron's Letter to the Pope (1301): the obverse shows the equestrian knight in mail, helmet and surcoat, with the lion rampant on his shield, and the reverse the heraldic shield, with the lion rampant, in Hunter Blair's words, "almost all open jaws and grasping claws",²² the lion at its most fierce. This seal has been reproduced on several occasions.²³ The Percy blue lion became the prime Percy heraldic emblem, though the fess of indented fusils was revived, as a second quarter, in the sixteenth century.²⁴

We left Walter as one of Percy's retinue in 1298. But by Christmas 1300 (the document is actually dated 25 December) he had clearly transferred into royal employment. A Wardrobe account²⁵ records the payment of forty shillings to "Walter the March King of Herald's" to promulgate the prohibition of tournaments throughout the kingdom:

"Waltero le Marchis Regi Haraldorum facienti quandam proclamacionem per preceptum Regis in presencia eiusdem Regis in aula sua infra castum Norht' die Natalis domini anno presenti videlicet XXV die Dec' de prohibicione Torneamentorum facta in Anglia per ipsum Regem de dono Regis per manus proprias apud Norhampton' xv die Dec'—xl.s"

Walter is also probably the "Walter de Rye" who sold a coat of body mail to the Earl of Ros for 100 shillings c. 6 December 1303.²⁶ He certainly appears again at the Feast of Swans in 1306. This was a major mass-investiture ceremony, held in Westminster and attended by over one thousand knights. Edward knighted 259 men, including the Prince of Wales and Piers Gaveston. At the Palace feast two swans formed the main dish.²⁷ A list of those attending the Feast included many minstrels, harpers, tabourers and trumpeters.²⁸ This section of the list begins, however, with a number of kings, clearly Kings of Arms:

Solutio facta diversis Menestrallis

Le Roy de Champaigne
Le Roy Capenny
Le Roy Baisescue
Le Roy Marchis
Le Roy Robert

each of whom received five marks. "Le Roy Marchis" is clearly Walter once again.

Walter's career "thus falls into line with that of many other seigneurial official, as he proceeds from private to royal employment".²⁹ In subsequent decades and centuries, other heralds were to follow Walter's path,³⁰ but he is the first in the records and hence has his place in national histories of heralds and heraldry.³¹ He also deserves recognition in a northern historical context, for it is surely no accident that Walter established himself on the Anglo-Scottish border at a critical period of warfare when heraldic identification was vital, and in the employ of one of the principal "rising stars" as Sir Henry Percy established himself as the major figure in the Northumbrian Marches.

NOTES

¹ H. Gough, *Scotland in 1298. Documents relating to the campaign of King Edward the first in that year, and especially to the Battle of Falkirk* (London, 1888), p. 17.

² C. H. Hunter Blair (1947), "Northern knights at Falkirk, 1298", *AA*³, XXV, 68-114.

³ N. Denholm-Young (1965), *History and Heraldry 1254 to 1310. A Study of the Historical Value of the Rolls of Arms* (Oxford).

⁴ For the historical context see: R. Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974); Sir F. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1954); M. C. Prestwich, *Edward I* (London, 1988).

⁵ C. J. McNamee "William Wallace's invasion of northern England in 1297", *Northern History*, xxvi (1990), 40-58.

⁶ H. Gough, op. cit. pp. 64-5.

⁷ J. Bain, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland, volume II* (Edinburgh, 1884), no. 1044.

⁸ See J. M. W. Bean "The Percies' acquisition of Alnwick", *AA*⁴, XXXII (1954), 309-19, and J. M. W. Bean "The Percies and their estates in Scotland", *AA*⁴, XXXV (1957), 91-9. On Bek and the northern frontier, see C. M. Fraser, *A History of Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham 1283-1311* (Oxford, 1957).

⁹ See N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit., A. R. Wagner (1956, 2nd edn), *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages* (Oxford), and A. R. Wagner (1967a) *Heralds of England* (London).

¹⁰ N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. pp. 60-1 (Norroy), and p. 56 and p. 166 (Morell). See also A. R. Wagner (1967a), op. cit. p. 17.

¹¹ N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. p. 9.

¹² H. Gough, op. cit. p. 17.

¹³ H. Gough, op. cit. p. 31.

¹⁴ N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. p. 57.

¹⁵ H. Gough, op. cit. pp. 129-57.

¹⁶ A. R. Wagner (1950), *Catalogue of English Medieval Rolls of Arms* (Oxford), pp. 27-9. The British Library Harleian MS reference is BL Harl. MS. 6589.

¹⁷ N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. p. 108.

¹⁸ See A. R. Wagner (1976b), *Additions and Corrections to 'A Catalogue of English Medieval Rolls of Arms'*, being part of *Aspilologia II: Rolls of Arms Henry III* (Oxford), p. 267.

¹⁹ N. Denholm-Young (1961), "The Song of Carleverock and the Parliamentary Roll of Arms as found in Cott. Ms. Calig. A. XVIII in the British Museum", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XLVII, 251-62.

²⁰ C. H. Hunter Blair (1947), op. cit. p. 105.

²¹ See C. H. Hunter Blair "Seals of Northumberland and Durham", *AA*³, XX (1923), 69-186, and XXI (1924), 38-120, and C. H. Hunter Blair (1924), *Northumbrian Monuments* (Newcastle upon Tyne), p. 5.

²² C. H. Hunter Blair (1943), "Armorial upon English seals from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries", *Archaeologia*, LXXXIX, 1-27, p. 9.

²³ See, for example, see C. H. Hunter Blair (1943), op. cit. plates iv and vii.

²⁴ See C. H. Hunter Blair (1924), op. cit. p. 5, and W. H. D. Longstaffe "The old heraldry of the Percies", *AA*², IV, 157-228 (including a discussion of Percy and Northumberland heralds in later centuries).

²⁵ British Library (BL) MS. Add. 7966 A, fo. 66. The document is first noted and printed in A. R. Wagner (1956), op. cit. p. 160.

²⁶ J. Bain, op. cit., p. 371. This reference was first noted by C. H. Hunter Blair (1947), op. cit. p. 106.

²⁷ For further discussion see N. Denholm-Young (1961), op. cit. pp. 257-9, and N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. p. 26 and other indexed references.

²⁸ Printed in E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), Appendix C, p. 234.

²⁹ N. Denholm-Young (1965), op. cit. p. 59.

³⁰ e.g. John O'thelake in 1381 (N. Denholm-Young, 1965, op. cit. p. 93).

³¹ e.g. A. R. Wagner (1967a), op. cit. pp. 7-8, 17 and 20.